**Understanding "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"**

*In the following excerpt, Fryxelll characterizes Eliot's character J. Alfred Prufrock as a trimmer (a term from Dante's Inferno)—a "lifeless, spiritless, mindless " person.*

T.S. Eliot is one of the best known poets in the twentieth century. And yet, when "The Waste Land," which is Eliot's longest, his most difficult, and certainly his most controversial poem, was first published in the year 1922, T.S. Eliot was comparatively unknown, despite a volume of poetry he had written entitled *Prufrock and Other Observations*, which appeared in 1917, and which contained, among other poems, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."...

Eliot's poems certainly are complex poems; they're never simple ones, and Eliot himself justified their complexity by arguing that the poet, who is to serve as the interpreter and critic of a complex age, must write complex poetry; and certainly, I think, we would all agree that our age is a complex age. Eliot's constant use of allusions in his poems is based upon his theory that the poet of today should write as if all the poets of the past were looking over his shoulder. The modern poet, then, must be conscious of the tradition which he has inherited, and he must carry on that tradition himself. "The Waste Land" is a cluttered mass of altered quotations: Eliot alters these quotations deliberately in order to suggest the loss of the vitality of the traditions of the past: poetic, moral, aesthetic, religious, social. It is the debasement of that tradition which has brought about the spiritual and the intellectual sterility of the modern age. And it is this wasteland of the twentieth century, this intellectual, spiritual, moral, aesthetic sterility which is the theme of the poem.

Allusion-jammed, though Eliot's poetry is, and dealing with complex emotions and complex ideas as he does, the language of his poems is still concrete; the images which he uses are fresh; they are striking and never completely decorative. And so, for instance, in the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" the evening is described as being spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table. This image is fresh and striking; it is a most unusual kind of image, and the image is also functional: that image describes the passivity of the evening as Prufrock sees it. Of course, everything in the poem is seen through Prufrock's eyes. The image also describes something of the half-dead condition of Prufrock himself, who is helpless, finally, as is a patient who is etherized upon a table. Or take the description of the yellow fog as if it were a cat. That description is a striking, vivid image, describing the slow settling of the fog over the city, and it suggests possibly also Prufrock's renunciation of his decision to disturb his universe of dilettante ladies by bringing a breath of real life to them. "The fog," we are told, "curled once about the house, and fell asleep." And so, too, in the course of the poem, Prufrock allows his decision to fall asleep. The cat image, here, also suggests sex. This is another desire of Prufrock which ends finally in inertia. Prufrock's failure in love is synonomous, you see, with the whole failure of society; his hopeless isolation is synonymous with the isolation of each trimmer from his fellow trimmers in Eliot's "Waste Land."...

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" concerns one of Eliot's Wastelanders. Prufrock is a member of the decadent aristocracy, just as Sweeney, in "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," is representative of Eliot's proletariats in the *Prufrock* volume of poetry. The various characters that Eliot depicts in this, his first volume of poetry, are almost below the level, really, of animals and human beings. These characters seem to feel no real passions and they have no real thoughts; they are machines without the gas or oil that keeps a machine going. They run on momentum without a genuine spark of life within them. Prufrock himself is something of an exception, but not much of a one.

Prufrock lives in a world in which art and music have become the idle conversation of dilettante women, who are spiritually, sexually, and intellectually dead, who spend their lives in an eternal round of afternoon tea parties, who may talk of art because it is expected that the class to which they belong should know something about it, but for whom the meaning and the vitality of art have long since been drained in the cycle of their teacups. Prufrock is one of this group. Prufrock is a dilettante like "the women who come and go—talking of Michaelangelo." Prufrock, we come to see, is as fastidious about his dress as they are, is as spiritually, sexually, and intellectually dead as they are. Like them, Prufrock has measured out his life "in coffee spoons," and his life has been as empty, as meaningless as theirs has been.

Prufrock is a trimmer. I trust that many of you, at least, know that trimmers were those souls in Dante's *Inferno* who were condemned to the vestibule of hell because they had never really lived, although they were supposedly alive; but they never really did enough evil to be sentenced to hell, and they never did enough good while they were alive to get to purgatory to start their way up to heaven. The Trimmers were lifeless, spiritless, mindless people....

Eliot uses Dante's trimmers in order to characterize the twentieth century. For Eliot, the vast majority of men and women of the twentieth century are trimmers: they are intellectually and spiritually dead, afraid of life, afraid of living, afraid of facing either good or evil and of experiencing really either, afraid of taking sides either for or against God, living in a sterile land; breeding spiritually and intellectually sterile children, slaves to the machine and conventions of the age, fearful of speaking out against either, fearful of taking either the way which leads to spiritual regeneration or the way which leads to damnation....

J. Alfred Prufrock is no Hamlet who will disturb and rectify the evil of his world, the evil which consists for Prufrock in its decadence, its spiritual, moral, intellectual, sexual, aesthetic sterility. Hamlet can cleanse the rottenness of Denmark; Prufrock can get only a glimpse of the sterility of this world, but he is helpless to do anything about it. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is thus his swan song to life, but it's also a song that he himself sings, for the poem is a dramatic monologue. He sings it in an effort to justify himself for not following the impulses, the suppressed desires of his alter-ego. And the effort damns him. But because the poem also shows that he has come to know his own inadequacies, to know that he is a trimmer, I think finally we do pity J. Alfred Prufrock. I always have....

Eliot builds his poem around the repetition of three central themes or motifs. The first of these is the time theme. This is given in the refrain, "And indeed there will be time." The time theme serves as an excuse for Prufrock for not disturbing his universe, for there is always time to put things off, as talking to his alter-ego—the "you" in the "Let us go now, you and I"—he shows that he will put off telling these women, and he will put off revealing his suppressed desires, apparently, for one of these women. There is always a tomorrow, there is always time.... And there will be time for Prufrock to change his mind about disturbing his universe; there will be time for Prufrock to put off doing it forever; there will be time to say farewell to the glimpse of real life he has had. There will be time for Prufrock to sink back eternally among the rounds of teacups.

The second theme of Prufrock is the "Do I dare" theme, in which Prufrock questions his ability to disturb his universe. This theme, allied as it is with the first theme and with the third theme as all three are allied one with the other, underscores the essential spiritual and moral cowardice of this man. Deliberately, Eliot has Prufrock begin this theme with a grandiose question when Prufrock asks, "Do I dare disturb the universe?" But before the end of the poem, this question degenerates into "Do I dare to eat a peach?" This symbolizes in its degeneration not only Prufrock's moral cowardice but also his essential concern with himself, from the outgoing desire to aid others in the question "Do I dare disturb the universe?" to the ingoing concern with his digestion.

The third theme is one of world weariness, which is begun in the line "For I have known them all already, known them all." This theme underscores Prufrock's weariness with the life that he leads, which is shown most effectively in the line "For I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." As Eliot develops this theme, he shows also Prufrock's bondage to the life which he is so weary of and his inability to bring any life to the half-alive world in which he lives. This theme is modified to stress Prufrock's renunciation of his plan. Prufrock must find some excuse for not doing what he, or rather, I should say, what his alter-ego, had hoped to do; and so he finds it by rationalizing that it would not have been worthwhile after all to bring his breath of life into the sterile world, that he would have been misunderstood, that to bring life into this world he would have had to be like Lazarus come to life, "Come back to tell you all." But he is not a John the Baptist, not a Hamlet. He is only, finally, a pathetic trimmer, J. Alfred Prufrock....

And finally,... let me comment on Eliot's use of just one rhyme within the poem, found in these lines: "Should I, after tea and cakes and ices, Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" The two words which rhyme, of course, are "ices" and "crisis," and the rhyming of these two words is deliberately ridiculous, as ridiculous as Prufrock is himself at times, as ridiculous as Prufrock certainly is here: he's a sexually repressed man, growing old, with a bald spot in the middle of his hair, who can't you see, even rise to any kind of passion. Thus, his love song can never be anything but a song of frustration, of despair; it can never be sung to anyone except the "you," and the wishes and the desires of that "you" lose to the "I," who has revealed why the "you" in Prufrock's monologue can never dominate the man's actions.

Source: Donald R. Fryxell, "Understanding 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'" in Robert Frost's *Chicken Feather; And Other Lectures*, from the 1968 Augustana College NDEA English Institute, edited by Arthur R. Huseboe, Augustana College Press, November, 1969, pp. 33-44.